Foundations of Healthy BDSM vs. Foundations of Abuse

Because Power & Control are the bargained-for exchange (the "currency") within BDSM-related dynamics, we must differentiate between these values to better identify when abusive dynamics show up disguised as BDSM.

Happy, Consensual BDSM		Abuse Disguised as BDSM	
Negotiation	Informed, mutual understanding of limits, desires & activities. Consent is sincere and freely given. Partners address how unplanned deviations are handled. Check in about consent or use progressive safewords (Green/Yellow/Red or 1-10 pain scale) to aid in communication during scene.	Coercion	Progressively deviates from the negotiated limits. Exploits vulnerable headspace to coerce agreement to new activity/intensity. Abusers may manipulate, groom, or control through shame/guilt including threats to ostracize or outing. Limits are dismissed, discouraged, or sabotaged. Negotiation is purposely rushed, limited, vague, incomplete, or absent.
Trust	Foundations of mutuality and respect for vulnerability. Partners invest time to share limits, desires & expectations. Receptive to feedback, honest exchange. Prioritizes prompt repair of mistakes. Neither party seeks consent for new, undisclosed activities during an altered or vulnerable state. Seeks permission first rather than forgiveness later.	Entitlement	Foundations of entitlement through pressure or bullying. Demands immediate response or compliance outside of scene. Insists on *carte blanche*; Safewords are mocked, belittled, or ignored. Relationship is conditioned upon giving up the right to safeword and/or withdraw consent. Forces new, unnegotiated activities; Assumes forgiveness after.
Equality	Activities are mutually beneficial & fulfilling, even if it appears that the partners have unequal roles or power dynamics. Each person's basic human dignity & bodily autonomy are honored. Intentional imbalances of power within dynamic are mutually agreeable. There is an atmosphere of transparency & respect for equality in negotiation.	Superiority	Only one person's needs are met. A mythos might be created around abuser's skills. Enforces a deliberate inequity of bargaining power & unnegotiated expectations. Small transgressions or mistakes are punished disproportionately. "For your own good," attitude prevails outside negotiated parameters. Abuser demands to be highest priority above anything else. All-or-nothing ultimatums.
Consent	Partners demonstrate that consent is valued & prioritized. Safewords, including non-verbal cues, are honored promptly & respectfully including the withdrawal of consent. Partners keep one another updated as relevant about outside partners, sexual health, etc. Long-term partners revisit relationship agreements periodically to update needs, boundaries & expectations.	Boundary Pushing	Abuser uses small transgressions to test tolerance for increased violations, including deception about safer sex practices. Makes excuses for repeated violations of discussed limits. Abuser creates situations that may endanger partner's real-life identities, roles, and responsibilities or where they must give up control over those priorities to abuser (financial, medical etc.).
Integration	Partners attend classes, social events & connect with others freely, without impediment. Partners encourage each other to seek out references from any source. Partners feel included in relevant social circles. Partners can leave when they want or make exceptions for real-life issues such as bad days or injuries. Partners are encouraged to be fully integrated, self-actualized individuals.	Isolation & Secrecy	Restricts or monitors outside interactions. Deliberately steers partner away from any information/ references that are contrary or critical. Progressive estrangement from supportive family & friends. Real-life interests & relationships are treated with suspicion or jealousy. Abuser uses coercive control (financial, medical, or psychological or physical threats, including threats of self-harm) to prevent partners from leaving.
Responsibility	Each is supported in maintaining their real-life, vanilla roles & responsibilities (parent, student, employee, etc.). Each partner takes ownership for their words & actions. Two-way communication is viewed as an essential part of the dynamic. Partners will not knowingly endanger each other's livelihoods or outside responsibilities.	Blame	Abuser takes no responsibility for own words or actions. Communication is one-way. Frequent blame shifting. "I thought you said you were a real submissive." When held accountable, make excuses, shames, or mobilizes allies they cultivated to defend them. Threatens with outing or uses sexual shame to control. "You agreed to the relationship, so you consented to this" mentality.

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Survivors Want 3 Things

To feel Safe

To be Heard

To be Believed

Understanding Survivor Experiences

1. **Survivors may initially deny or stay silent.** "Humiliation, shame, and fear equal silence." Delayed disclosure is an expected response to trauma as is denial. Shame & fear are an abuser's tools, isolating the victim further and keeping them from meaningful help.
2. **It may not be safe to leave.** It isn't uncommon to need to maintain a relationship with their abuser for various reasons (financial, children, family, work, etc). The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is when they try to leave the abuser. A decision to stay doesn't mean an absence of abuse; it means it isn't safe to leave…yet.
3. **Memory is non-linear**. When under threat, stress hormones impact the brain's memory storage processes. Memories retained under threat might not be linear or easy to access. Stress responses inhibit the hippocampus (responsible for long-term memory) and the prefrontal cortex (responsible for executive function/decision-making) while activating the amygdala (the brain's threat response system). Memories are retained more like a wartime photojournalist than a methodically detailed documentary. Accessing them can feel like a game of Operation, except the brain reacts to the buzz as a danger signal when one tries to pull any of them out.
4. **Intersectional disincentives.** Levels of isolation may vary, but combined with other identities, vulnerabilities, or inequalities (such as economic insecurity, homelessness, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, disabled, non-binary, trans, sex workers, etc.) disclosure of an abusive kink dynamic could prove a disastrous disincentive to reporting:
    a. Communities with a history of violent, institutionalized injustice suffered through the police, courts, and "helping professions" (medical/mental health) have less incentive to disclose; and
    b. The more vulnerable the individual, the more at risk they are for retaliation, victim blaming, and gaslighting in what might be the only supportive community they have; or
    c. The presence of other vulnerable people (children, elders, pets, etc) could further inhibit options that could impact eligibility for benefits or compliance with case management, custody or caregiving responsibilities that are outside of their immediate control.
5. **Each person is different.** Each person will process trauma differently. It can look like any or none of the following: shock, numbness, detachment, denial, pouring oneself into work or kids, short temper, flat affect, drained, pretending to be "fine", insomnia, loss of appetite, easily activated by triggers, experiencing flashbacks, shame, self-blame, increased risk-taking, forgetting things, anxiety and inappropriate intimacy/oversharing. What matters is what that person experiences, not our assumptions about what we think they should feel. Don't make survivors perform their trauma to appease a belief system.
6. **"Big T" trauma vs. "little t" trauma.** It doesn't matter what kind of abuse someone experienced, whether it be one big event or an accumulation of chronic events, it can still be similarly stored as trauma. Trauma is the experience of an event that is perceived as life-threatening and has lasting adverse effects. That effect can ebb and flow or be triggered by retraumatizing reminders of the original trauma or associated responses.
7. **Regaining trust & control is key.** Sexual assault and abuse violate one's sense of safety and autonomy. It is important that survivors have control over their own processes and outcomes to whatever extent is administratively feasible. Focus should be on listening, reducing harm, and building a plan to support them whether individually or within community.

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Taking Care of Ourselves

1. **Trust your gut**. If something feels "off" about a partner, playdate, or a scene, pay attention and keep your eyes open and your safeword handy. You may withdraw consent at any time and for no reason at all.
2. **Establish boundaries that are right for you, right now**. The "no limits" aspiration is unrealistic and "blanket consent" can easily be abused. Boundaries are the traffic cones that protect the areas that are under construction today; limits are the guardrails to keep both parties from falling over an edge of no return. Identify your needs & limits to define the playing field. Build on good experiences and honor the lessons learned from the bad ones.
3. **Recognize boundary-pushing behavior**. Whether it is a scene (e.g. needle play was never discussed, but pulled out as a "surprise") or socially implied boundaries (e.g. sending an unsolicited dick pic), watch for patterns of violations. Be wary before plunging into "no safeword" agreements.
4. **Understand the signs of abuse**. Notice if partners are isolating us from support systems, controlling aspects of our lives that were never negotiated, or issuing outlandish threats, punishments, or ultimatums. These are signals to seek appropriate support from someone outside of the situation (if safe).
5. **If your consent was violated**:
    a. The blame rests with the person who chose to ignore communicated/expected boundaries and violate trust during a vulnerable moment.
    b. Seek out those who can provide support, care, and safety while honoring your autonomy. This includes medical or mental health care with kink-aware professionals.
    c. If you decide to report to the police or some other authority, bring a support person you trust. Because certain processes have time pressures, tactics, and legal requirements, it is easy to get lost in details. This person can help you organize your thoughts ahead of time and ensure your questions are answered.
    d. Your recovery is your business – no one gets to dictate how you survive and how you need to heal to thrive. No one else gets to tell your story for you but you. Be kind to yourself. It will take time to process.

Trauma Informed Ways to Support Survivors

1. **Believe them.** Be a safe place. Offer a judgment-free zone where they can be heard.
2. **Validate instincts about disturbing behavior.** If there are patterns of problematic behavior, be honest. When other voices echo concerns, others can more easily identify grooming and manipulation. This is often the only "vetting" any of us get to do.
3. **Avoid victim blaming or adding shame/guilt**. Don't put accountability for an (alleged) abuser's behavior on a survivor's shoulders, even if it has taken a long time for them to share their story. Avoid "should have" lectures, nitpicking, or judgment in our responses; just listen.
4. **Honor our choices to help us feel safe again.** There was a violation of choice; preserve a survivor's right to choose their path forward wherever possible. Let survivors be in control of their own recovery & narrative. Do not unilaterally make decisions. Prioritize accountability & psychological safety.
5. **Avoid retraumatization & vicarious trauma.** Caregiving might stir up your own issues and past traumas. Remember to cultivate trusted support systems for yourself too!
6. **It isn't about you.** Be aware of how your reactions may trigger heightened anxiety and burdens for the survivor. Strong, angry, vengeful reactions could cause worry about possible violent confrontations, causing the survivor to abandon their healing to protect you. Seek outside help for your own vicarious trauma reactions.
7. **Don't make assumptions.** Don't presume to know what they may want or need. They may need to be touched, we may not. They may need help, they may not. Confirm consent for touch & intimacy even for existing connections.
8. **Be honest & intentional.** Know your limits and don't make promises you can't keep. Be consistent with your words & actions. Be realistic in what you can provide and your ability to follow through.

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Creating a Trauma-Informed Culture of Consent

It starts with us…

1. **Model good consent practices**. Ask before hugging or touching. Be okay with hearing the word "No". Practice saying and hearing "no" without explanations or justifications.
2. **Be a responsible bystander**. If it is safe to do so, try to address or redirect questionable issues in the moment or soon after. Don't ignore a "Red" in public playspaces. Report to a DM if unsure.
3. **Check in periodically on relationship agreements**. Even with established, long-term, 24/7 dynamics. You are not the same people you once were. Needs & limits can change. It's okay to adjust your agreements accordingly.
4. **Negotiate & communicate clearly**. Don't assume you both have the same definitions. Check for understanding. Reconfirm needs and limits. Don't settle for "whatever".
5. **Don't "amp up" with unexpected activities mid-scene.** If it wasn't discussed beforehand, save it for next time. Be careful about relying on consent given while in subspace/topspace. It's better to make a plan for another playdate than to push the current one too far.
6. **Never belittle safewording.** Mocking the use of safewords signals that we care about consent in name only. Not only does this erode trust, but it also gives an excuse to abusers to coercively violate these protections.
7. **Always check in**. Plan to chat after a playdate to better understand any issues that might have been triggered. Readjust as needed. Be open, honest & curious.
8. **Seek informed, sincere consent.** Still watch for non-verbal cues that your partner is into what you're doing. Be prepared to stop or slow down if you're not clear. Utilize traffic light system, 1-10 pain scale, etc to gauge current state.
9. **Regularly seek, give & receive feedback.** Feedback is healthy. Be willing to genuinely. continually work to improve your ethics and consent practices just as much as you work on your techniques.
10. **Maintain room for humanity**. We are each entitled to bodily autonomy, human dignity, and mutual equality regardless of your negotiated role. This is a bargained-for exchange of power and control, but ultimately both partners should benefit and be able to be themselves. We are each whole people deserving of respect – make space for emotions, injuries, illnesses & vulnerabilities.
11. **Just because you had a good experience doesn't mean everyone will**. Countering allegations with our own positive experiences only reinforces the power of the abuser over the survivor. Just because the accused acted correctly once doesn't mean they act that way all the time with each person.
12. **Watch for oppressive behaviors or attitudes**. Racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, etc. all signal entitlement and superiority. Oppressive behavior tolerated against any one group signals tolerance of abuse in general.
13. **Accountability is an act of love**. Sometimes we are resistant to holding others accountable because we all sensitive to excluding or rejecting people. But holding someone accountable for their actions is a way of telling them that we care about our community enough to be honest when they have violated our agreed norms & expectations. Accountability is an invitation to make things right again.
14. **Check your assumptions & biases.** Men can be raped. Submissives can be abusive. Established players can be victimized. Sex workers aren't "assuming the risk". Sexual violations are overwhelmingly committed by someone already trusted by the victim. Unchecked biases and assumptions provide ready-made excuses for abusers and effectively silences survivors.
15. **Avoid victim blaming narratives.** Victim blaming is a tool of abusers, perpetuating harmful myths and reinforcing patterns of guilt for survivors. These myths & narratives inhibit other survivors from coming forward. It also gives abusers the ammunition and protection they need to continue their manipulation and coercion.

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Maintaining Safe Spaces

Advice specific to our social & leadership roles in our communities, including our public online responses.

Listen without defensiveness or labeling.	Resist labeling a violation as a "misunderstanding" or the victim as "disgruntled". Patterns of truth often emerge when we listen without jumping to the defense of the accused or our space/event. One report may lead to others. We are not entitled to "know everything", only the relevant facts/outcomes for our position and responsibilities.
Be careful with mediation or restorative justice.	Almost all forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) have ethical standards that require the victim's consent and/or adequate supports when confronting an abusive party, including neutrality of the facilitator. Be aware that states have wild variations in how ADR professionals are certified and how grievances are addressed. Forcing these practices or using untrained community members can irresponsibly expose both parties to additional trauma and psychological harm.. A survivor's right to say no should always be preserved.
Watch for predatory patterns of isolation, coercive control.	Recognize problematic patterns in community-level behavior that could indicate abuse or coercion. Prioritize addressing the "broken stairs" (repeat violators we tolerate) in our spaces. Reach out to those who have been absent, particularly after the start of a new relationship. Follow up with habitual "oops" players. Even the most "woke" members of the community can become predatory. Record complaints and actions taken.
Establish consistent expectations regarding handling violations.	Establish a clear & consistent policy that aligns with your level of risk/responsibility to your membership and known legal/insurance obligations. Communicate this clearly & directly to membership, ensure staff are well-trained. Be clear what stays confidential and what doesn't. Have a written policy in place addressing how you will handle any real or perceived conflicts of interest if someone close to you is accused. What is your back-up if you cannot be objective?
Promote both emotional and physical safety training.	Consider integrating training on trauma-informed care and signs of abuse for all staff and volunteers. Offer more than introductory/newbie classes. Provide ongoing social supports, and a list of resources you have vetted. Consider continuing education for membership renewals. Embrace that even experienced staff and players can benefit from a refresher on how to maintain an empowering environment.
Reevaluate "report or it didn't happen" requirements.	Recognize that reporting abuse to the authorities is <u>often</u> not a safe or feasible option. In addition to the problems with the reporting process itself (inherent stigma and bias against those in alternative lifestyles, bias against victims of sexual assault and oppressive privilege at play in interviews or assessments) reporting may even put a victim in more danger and it may also out them to the perpetrator, employers or families of origin. Pressuring a victim to report reinforces the message left by their abuser: that their autonomy and their consent ultimately do not matter.
Maintain trauma-informed, safe spaces for survivors.	Maintaining a welcoming, responsive, safe space for survivors is the clearest signal that abuse will not be tolerated in our community, that we see through the disguise. Denying access to a party is not governed by "innocent until proven guilty" standards. Standards should be clear & consistent. Abusers should not feel more welcome or more comfortable than survivors. Survivors have the right to tell their own story and control their own privacy. It sends a message to perpetrators that survivors' voices are heard and honored even if there is no chance of conviction.

Always Avoid Retraumatization

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